

Threats and Magnitude of Terrorist Attacks

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Environmental Health Programs
Office of Radiation Protection



Any significant terrorist event involving the dispersal of radioactive materials will result in a large-scale response from multiple levels of government and several nongovernment entities. The responsibility for *public health and safety* rests with local and state officials. Within the United States the primary responsibility for *crisis management* in the event of a terrorist incident rests with the federal government.

Crisis management is focused on the terrorists and on preventing their intended actions. It is a law enforcement function that addresses the causes of a terrorist incident, the identity, motivation, and capability of the terrorists and the weapons they employ.

Upon receiving a threat or other information indicating a possible terrorist use of nuclear material, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) conducts a formal threat credibility assessment using experts from both FBI and the Department of Energy (DOE). Due to the large number of hoax threats and the incremental nature of incoming information, an assessment is conducted before deploying federal assets. The FBI has developed a four-tiered system to characterize the threat and describe the thresholds at which specific federal assets will be called.

Threat Level 4: *Minimal Threat* – the threat condition does not justify unusual actions and agencies continue to operate under normal day-to-day conditions.

Threat Level 3: *Potential Threat* – there are indications of a threat, but the threat has not yet been assessed as credible. At this level, the FBI institutes the assessment process and begins to develop contingency deployment plans for resources.

Threat Level 2: *Credible Threat* – the assessment has confirmed the involvement of a “weapon of mass destruction” and indicated that the threat is credible. The FBI would probably deploy a Domestic Emergency Support Team, a specialized United States government interagency team designed to provide expert advice on requirements and resources. At this point the primary focus remains on law enforcement actions designed to prevent and resolve the treat. However, selected assets will be pre-positioned and a joint operations center will be established to manage the developing crisis in the interagency environment incorporating law enforcement planning concerns with consequence-management concerns.

Consequence management is focused on the results of the incident and may be required over a long-term period. It addresses how the incident affects or potentially might affect public health, safety, and the environment. Consequence management includes measures to protect public health, safety, and the environment, to restore essential government services, and to provide emergency relief to governments, businesses, and individuals affected by the consequences of terrorism.

Threat Level 1: *Weapon of Mass Destruction Incident* – a weapon of mass destruction terrorism incident has occurred and the full federal response will be required. The Federal Emergency Management Agency would lead the federal government’s efforts to respond to the devastation through consequence management in support of the FBI as the lead federal agency.

Sources

NCRP Report No. 138

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